

Self-Induced Friction: The Assault Support Request Process

Subject Area Logistics

EWS 2006

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EWS Contemporary Issue Paper
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to

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07 February 2006

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2006		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Self-Induced Friction: The Assault Support Request Process				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command Staff College Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 12	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

On 01 May 2003, from the flight deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, President George W. Bush announced that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended."¹ Subsequently, coalition forces transitioned to the ongoing Support and Stability Operations (SASO) in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). United States Marine Corps rotary wing assault support assets were charged with supporting coalition forces not only within the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) Area of Operations (AO), but beyond the MEF boundaries as well.² In turn, the majority of rotary wing assault support tasking has been the transportation of passengers and cargo in support of preplanned Assault Support Requests (ASR). However, the Assault Support Request process has been subject to self-induced friction at various echelons, resulting in the inefficient use of assets and unfulfilled requests for assault support. In order to mitigate this friction, ASR originators need to be held responsible for submitting accurate requests and each participant in the process must ensure accountability and the timely flow of critical information.

¹ George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on Iraq From the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 39, no. 18, (05 May 2003) 516-518.

² The MEF AO is approximately the size of Arkansas (53,000 square miles).

Assault Support Request Process - Planning

ASR Process

Assault Support Requests are categorized as either Preplanned ASRs or Immediate ASRs, with the difference being Immediate ASRs are simply those that due to unforeseen circumstances, were not preplanned. While the ASR process is simple in theory, it often encounters friction and succumbs to the fog of war in practice. A Preplanned ASR begins with the requesting unit and is subsequently routed via the Fire Support Coordination Center (FSCC) at each echelon, where it is screened and prioritized, enroute to the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) Commander for approval. Once approved, the senior fire support coordination agency sends the request to the Aviation Combat Element (ACE) via the Tactical Air Command Center (TACC) for planning and execution. The TACC also passes the request throughout the Marine Air Command and Control System (MACCS). Immediate ASRs are normally submitted by contacting the Direct Air Support Center (DASC), either directly or through the FSCC, via the Tactical Air Request/Helicopter Request (TAR/HR) net. The TACC will typically delegate launch and divert authority to the DASC, who will then source assets to support the request.³

³ United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-25.5: Direct Air Support Center Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), 4-8.

Requesting Unit Responsibilities

The first step to improving the ASR process begins with planning. When submitting a preplanned ASR, the requesting unit does not have the capacity to guarantee the success of the request, but it certainly has the capacity to guarantee its failure. As the ASR is processed from the originator to the MAGTF Commander for approval, it is imperative that the request be screened for completeness and accuracy at each echelon. Sincere quality control throughout the entire approval process will significantly increase the likelihood of approval and subsequent successful support during execution. The familiar axiom "garbage in, garbage out" holds true.

Each echelon within the ASR approval process needs to ensure that requests are consolidated when appropriate to eliminate duplicity. To facilitate success, the ASR originator should proactively track the progress of the request and its status in order to determine the callsign and timeline of the aircraft that will be in support. Additionally, if the ASR is delayed or denied at any echelon prior to approval, it is critical that this information be pushed back to the originator in order to eliminate the assumption that support will be executed as requested.

If the specifics of the Assault Support Request change at any point following its submission (including cancellation by

the requestor), this information must be promulgated immediately to all affected parties. During OIF II, assault support aircraft would commonly arrive at the pickup zone only to discover that "their assigned cargo/pax were often not there or not what was listed on the ASR."⁴ The bottom line is straightforward: Assault Support Requests need to be handled with the same level of diligence associated with requests for fire support.

Supporting Unit Responsibilities

Assault support apportionment and allocation are products of ACE mission analysis in support of the MAGTF concept of operations.⁵ In a SASO environment, enduring assault support missions (ASR support, CASEVAC⁶, TRAP/QRF⁷) comprise the majority of assault support tasking, while heliborne raids and assaults are executed as the tactical situation dictates. CASEVAC, TRAP/QRF, and heliborne raids and assaults are typically addressed outside of the standard ASR process; however, the

⁴ Colonel Robert Hermes, "Arrival Departure Airfield Control Group (ADACG) Assault Support Request (ASR) Problems," *Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned* no. 40049, 27 October 2005 <<https://www.mccll.usmc.mil/index.cfm?disp=lms.cfm&doit=view&lmsid=40049>> (22 November 2005).

⁵ United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-24: Assault Support* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1999), 3-2. Apportionment is determination of the total level of effort that should be dedicated to the aviation tasks required to accomplish the MAGTF's mission. Allocation translates the level of effort into the number of sorties required.

⁶ Casualty Evacuation.

⁷ Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel/Quick Reaction Force.

majority of rotary wing assault support assets are tasked in support of preplanned ASRs.

As approved ASRs are received by the TACC and allocated to subordinate units (MAGs and squadrons), they must be subject to quality control practices similar to those expected of the units requesting support. However, additional requirements exist for the ACE. In addition to reviewing the ASRs for crucial information and accuracy, the ACE chain of custody must also synchronize all of the requests in order to facilitate economy of ACE assets. In a MEF level operation, this is unquestionably a critical, demanding task. Although mission success cannot be guaranteed by appropriately synchronizing the ASRs, an unsatisfactory outcome is all but certain with a poorly structured ASR support plan. Throughout OIF II it was a "common occurrence to find three different sections going to the same places at about the same time, picking up minimal pax/cargo."⁸

After the MAG structures the ASR support plan, squadrons will be tasked with specific ASRs to support. The squadron Operations Department, in conjunction with squadron mission planners, develops the specific routing, load plan, and fuel plan to accomplish all assigned tasking. Part of this detailed planning consists of contacting the requesting unit to confirm the details of the ASR. This may not be necessary or feasible

⁸ Hermes.

in all cases due to operational tempo or lack of connectivity, but it should be accomplished when the situation permits, as this will be the final check and balance on the process prior to mission execution.

Assault Support Request Process - Execution

Requesting Unit Responsibilities

The requesting unit's responsibilities associated with their ASR continue through to execution of the request. Primarily, the requesting unit must ensure that any last minute changes or updates to the request be relayed to the supporting aircraft, via the MACCS, by any available means. It is also imperative that the requesting unit ensure that all personnel and cargo to be transported be in the pickup zone by the appointed time, if not earlier (as dictated by local Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)).

On occasion, the requesting unit will arrive at the designated pickup zone ahead of schedule and then depart on aircraft other than those they were scheduled for. When this happens, the requesting unit must again ensure that this information is relayed to the personnel controlling the pickup zone, the MACCS, and subsequently the aircraft originally allocated to support the request.

Supporting Unit Responsibilities

Assault support assets often operate in a very dynamic environment, especially in support of SASO. Flight leaders (typically Section Leaders) must fully appreciate the manner in which each mission that they execute, no matter how routine or mundane it may seem, supports higher and adjacent units.

Squadrons must promote flight leadership development that not only stresses tactical proficiency, but that emphasizes adaptability, proactivity, and forward thinking as well.

Adaptability, proactivity, and forward thinking directly contribute to effective ASR management throughout mission execution. For example, the supporting aircraft must habitually communicate any changes to the scheduled timeline, aircraft routing, or ASR discrepancies (more or less passengers and cargo than planned, the wrong passengers, et cetera) to the appropriate MACCS agencies in order to foster enhanced situational awareness across the battlespace. Simply stated: what do I know, whom do I need to tell, and how do I tell them?

Flight leaders can further facilitate the ASR process by specifically requesting their assigned ASRs upon arrival in the pickup zone and providing immediate feedback to address discrepancies. Flight leaders should also communicate which ASRs (to include the number of passengers and amount of cargo)

that they are disembarking. The goal is to prevent "Section Leaders out in the middle of nowhere trying to figure it out."⁹

Additional Factors

Command and Control

Effective command and control is the critical component to successful execution of the ASR process. Within the execution of assault support, the MACCS, specifically the DASC, is the principle facilitator of effective Command and Control and common situational awareness. However, the DASC requires proactive participation of both supported and supporting units in order to efficiently exercise procedural control and manage the successful execution of all assigned ASRs. Without such participation, the DASC will not possess the situational awareness required to facilitate mission accomplishment, particularly tasking assault support assets to support Immediate ASRs.

The ATO Execution System (AES) is an innovative, yet simple approach to building and maintaining the required aviation-related situational awareness throughout the battlespace. AES is a web-based database that consolidates all pertinent information regarding the current aviation operating picture and makes it readily available and easily accessible throughout the

⁹ Hermes.

MAGTF or Joint Operations Area (JOA). In terms of ASR support, AES includes key pieces of information such as scheduled missions, planned timelines, pickup and landing zones, and ASRs supported, as well as hyperlinks to the original ASRs. As mission status updates of both the supporting and supported units are submitted, AES is updated to provide near real-time situational awareness to anyone with network connectivity. This capability inherently promotes effective ASR management, thereby maximizing economy of assault support assets. Based on its current usefulness in OIF and potential future applications, AES is a tool that must continue to evolve and be implemented throughout the Marine Corps.

Arrival Departure Airfield Control Group (ADACG)

The ADACG also plays a vital role in the success or failure of ASR execution by processing inbound and outbound cargo and personnel at an airfield.¹⁰ In order to contribute to the efficiency of the ASR process, it is imperative that ADACG personnel maintain situational awareness on all ASRs, as well as the aircraft tasked to support them, that will transit their facility. Through the use of AES, ADACG personnel can easily confirm expected ASRs, their associated composition of passengers and cargo, and maintain an awareness of inbound and outbound aircraft. As discrepancies are confirmed, ADACG

¹⁰ The ADACG is an organization of the Marine Logistics Group (MLG).

personnel need to push this information to the MACCS, again, to cultivate common situational awareness throughout the battlespace. An assault support liaison to the ADACG would provide a vital link between the FSSG and the Wing to assist in coordination.

Summary

Although the ASR process is simple in theory, in practice there are shortfalls that result in inefficient use of assets and unfulfilled requests for assault support. In order to overcome these deficiencies, ASR originators must be held responsible for submitting accurate requests, as well as promptly communicating any changes to the request once it has been submitted. More importantly, the proactive push and pull of essential information by all participants will enhance common situational awareness across the battlespace, inherently facilitating successful execution of assault support requests. Without a committed, collaborative effort, the MAGTF will continue to be subject to the self-induced friction generated by the Assault Support Request process.

Word Count: 1828

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